

WULF HERZOGENRATH

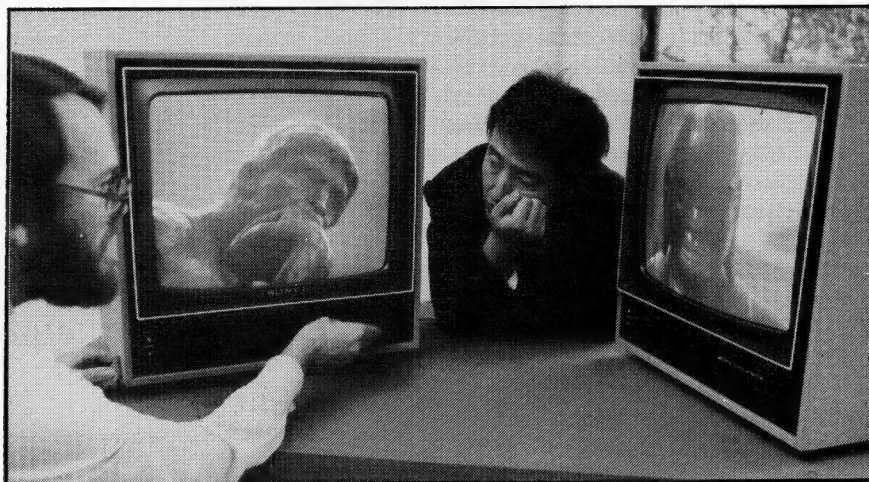
Attempts to get rid of the Damned Box; or, the beginnings of an art medium in Europe

Among the givens of cultural life in the Sixties was the fact that "everyone" hid the television set, that "everyone" always assured and was assured that television didn't belong in the home of the culturally aware, just as "everyone" read the scandal sheets only at the barber shop or beauty parlor.

The television was hidden behind rustic wooden doors while books remained the irrepressible tokens of culture. For the positive aspects of the television medium to arise naturally was permitted only under the heading of sports and relaxation at the end of the day. It went without saying that it had nothing to do with cultural pursuits.

The Americans, with their acceptance of all kinds of technology and progress, including the concepts of communications, and their unadorned consumer fetishism, had developed far fewer complexes about television. It was such a Big Brother for the populace that life without it was hardly imaginable; there was no way around it. So it was fitted into everyday life and thereby into culture, too.

The beginnings of video as an art medium in Germany and the USA are as different as can be imagined. It is seldom possible to date the birth of a new medium so precisely: March, 1963 in Wuppertal at the private Galerie Parnass of Rolf Jahrling and his wife, both architects, with the *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television* by Nam June Paik, a native of Korea who had been living in Freiburg, Munich and Cologne for over six years. Paik, concurrent with Wolf Vostell and, later, Joseph Beuys, belonged to the Fluxus artists, an international group which put on many concerts, actions, happenings, exhibitions, readings and similar events deemed "Neo-Dada." The Fluxus movement: an anti-gestus, playful, fre-



quently destructive, sometimes merely ironical distancing of objects, value concepts and traditions, but always an irritation.

In his studio, Paik had already manipulated television sets, "interfering" with the broadcasts and so—as described to him by the tachist painter Karl Otto Goetz—painted with electronic lines. By means of magnets and modifications in the picture tube, it was possible to change and manipulate the picture, sometimes unpredictably, but to some extent in a predetermined manner. Sets were turned upside down and the programs pulled down to a single line: Zen for TV!

Wolf Vostell adapted television sets in a similar way. His concept was called "de-collage" and he set up six televisions with image modifications of this kind in his first video exhibition in the USA at the non-commercial Smolin Gallery in New York during May, 1963. Vostell had carried out a whole series of important actions with television sets, himself. Perhaps the most impressive was on George Segal's farm in New Brunswick, New Jersey on May 19, 1963 during the YAM Festival. Wrapping a television set with barbed wire and burying it was one of the high points. Entombing the set in the earth while the program was still running was as unmistakably an affront to the medium as Vostell's suggestion of new ways to view TV: throwing custard pies at the set while watching the evening news, or looking at the program through holes cut in paper or painted canvas.

In the *9 Decollages* by Vostell, pre-

sented in Wuppertal on September 14, 1963, there were three immediate references to video/television: at 6:20 p.m., the world premiere of the film *Sun In Your Head*, and six minutes of decollaged television programs. At 8:15 the premiere's audience, assembled in a stone quarry, watched the program from a distance until Vostell imploded the set with a well-aimed shot: the medium's first killing (many intelligent variations on this murder are to follow later). At 9:00 the environment *Art and the House Beautiful Demand Training*, in which "disturbed" television sets were confronted with objects, was unveiled in the Jahrling home.

When Paik reduces everything offered in a broadcast to a Zen line or, as in many of his later objects, replaces it with an aquarium or a single candle, and Vostell buries a set or shoots it, this coincides with a position which Joseph Beuys takes when he covers the picture surface with a sheet of felt in his *Felt TV*. Demonstrated in several actions since 1966 and on the video recordings of Gerry Schum, the television set is made an object to be treated and mistreated. The information flow is changed or interrupted, the one-way street from Big Brother to the passive consumer is blocked. Here, the artist acts in the viewer's place. He behaves in an eminently political fashion, even though only in an esthetic context. The TV box becomes a stand-in, receiving aggressive acts against the flood of information: the senseless stuffing of seeming facts. The possibilities for manipulation are "punished," the viewer "freed."

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It is astonishing that only those who understand the European point of view, as Paik does, or German Fluxus artists, carried this out. A few Americans followed in the Seventies, like Douglas Davis with his *Burying Camera* for "Project 74," a remarkable homage to the spirit of European Fluxus. It is also astonishing that these actions and esthetic positions were almost totally forgotten in both European and USA coverage of Fluxus. The historical beginning of a new art medium is neither recognized, described nor considered important, at least by contemporaries. The shock, the audience reception, the gestus of destruction, all this was more conspicuous. Only George F. Schwarzbauer, in the program to the 1981/82 Fluxus Exhibition in Wuppertal, re-discovers Vostell's and Paik's media aspect and deals with them extensively.

It is remarkable that the object character of television has been made visible with such insistence mainly in Germany. In the USA, the medium is much more fascinating for its electronic possibilities and as undemanding entertainment. The television cabinet is usually hidden in the objects and installations of the artists and the "box" made invisible. Only the picture

tube, the picture surface counts, for its transmission of images.

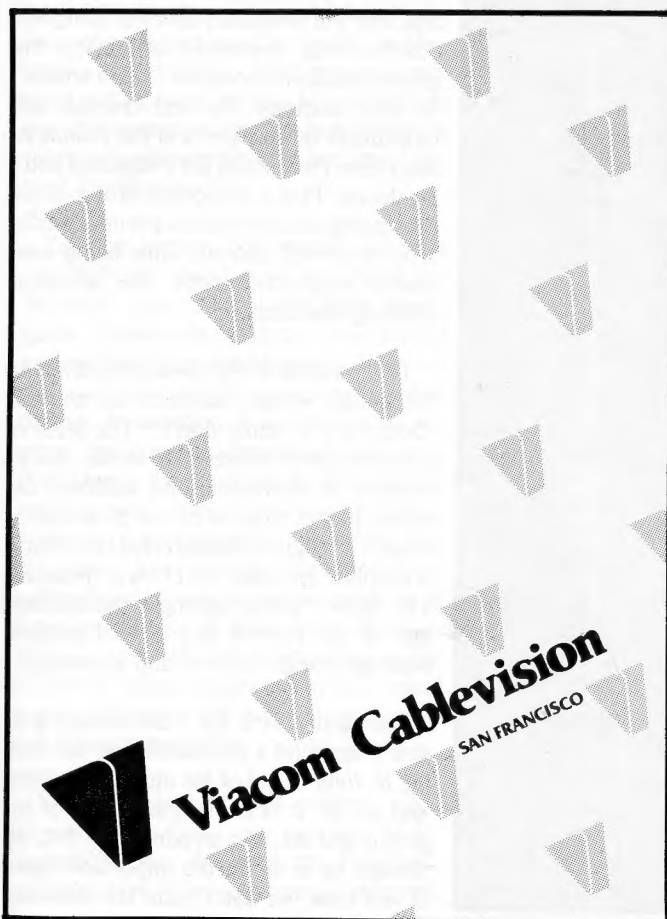
That German artists treat the television box aggressively and want to change it as an object is demonstrated by numerous video pieces. Wolf Kahlen, by mirroring the picture tube, made the viewer's space into the content of television: an elegant variant of the early Fluxus gestus to activate the viewer and make him an object of his own meditation and observation. Again, Kahlen who stuck a stone on the picture surface, so the "stumbling block" remained constantly visible between television program and viewer. To demonstrate that this object, like any other, was liable to artistic modification, Gunther Uecker drove a nail into the television screen. And Ingo Gunther set a neon tube before the video image, dividing it like a magnet and outshining it.

Video art—working with the electronic medium, its means of production, its structures, the privatizing/democratizing of Big Brother—begins with the refusal to be influenced by the television box. This happened in Germany, a fact which can be interpreted in many different ways. It has been almost ignored, and not only in writing the history of Fluxus. This beginning has not been interpreted for its meaning

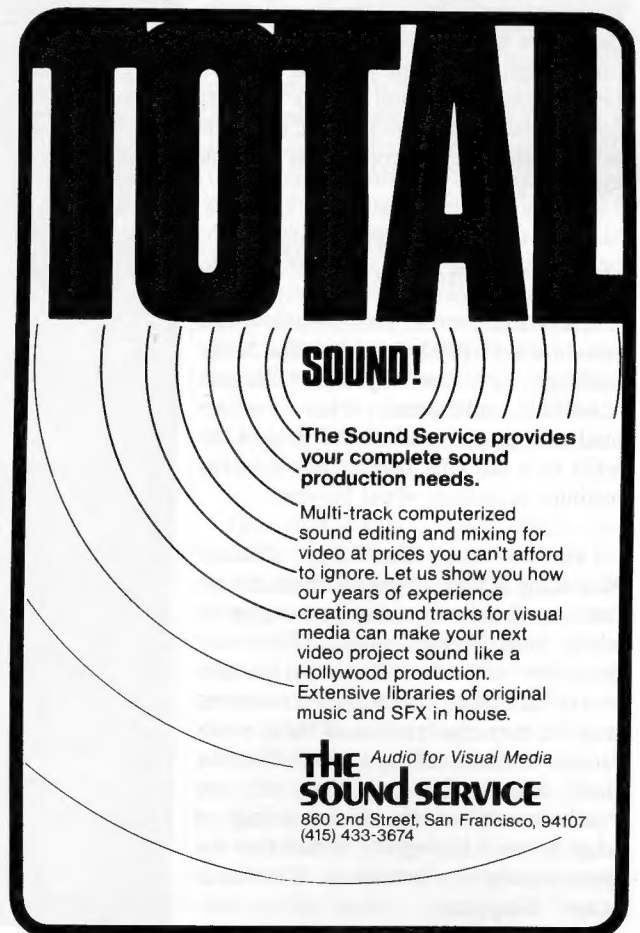
in the history of television, either. My opening remarks on the widespread rejection of television as an instrument of culture can hardly explain the work of the Fluxus artists. It would be even less satisfactory to blame it all on arbitrariness in the leaders of the rebellion.

Might it not be that the television box as sculptural object simply counts for more than the informational impulse of the television station, and that this fact irritated the German artists? Sensitized them? The box as distributor of commands, as the actual end of the chain of command and, simultaneously, the receiver watching over the individual was for German artists and artists working in Germany an especially politicizing impetus for their work. The misuse of media, the manipulation through new mass media, brought with it in Germany a greater consciousness of the seductive nature of "cold" information. Perhaps this sense of social criticism will unite with the artistic components—sculpture, music-like changes in the image, actions with the character reality, the negation of the carrier—to result in No Video. Or, without the box I can see myself much better!

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